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ABSTRACT

The factors driving learning cultures within organizations were examined in case studies of seven organizations in New South Wales and South Australia. The seven organizations represented the pharmaceutical manufacturing, community services and health, agriculture, information technology, and local government sectors. In some cases, organizations' commitment to learning was characterized primarily by the establishment or expansion of formal on-the-job and off-the-job training/learning programs. In other cases, organizations increased commitment to learning by encouraging employees to engage in more collaborative teamwork that generated new forms of learning or by establishing new ways of working (including the introduction of work performance standard setting and performance feedback measures). The following factors were mentioned as driving organizations' commitment to learning: the pressures of an increasingly competitive economic environment; the need to acquire and retain staff with appropriate work skills; newly created forms of management or work organization; and provision of more feedback regarding employees and organization performance. The following dimensions of learning culture were identified: environments pressing the organization to change; organizational systems promoting learning; and practices securing employee commitment. Creation of learning cultures appeared to require deliberate arrangements designed to maximize productive work in a highly competitive environment. (MN)

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Drivers of learning cultures within organisations: findings from case studies

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The concept of a leaning culture has become a popular one in recent years, yet we still have little understanding of it outside the usually prescriptive exhortations that have been issued by a range of management gurus. This research, then, set out to look at a range of successful organisations that saw themselves as demonstrating aspects of a learning culture or who were moving towards it. These organisations were found to embody a highly variable array of features that they saw as associated with their new culture and these were closely linked to their particular environment and the forces that led them to adopt a new, learning-centred approach.

For many, the organisational changes they have adopted were ones in which a learning orientation emerged rather than being part of their original strategy. If this were to be typical of organisations more generally, it would have important implications for policy frameworks designed to inculcate a learning culture in Australian enterprises.

For almost two decades now, a recurrent theme in the rhetoric of organisations, industry and governments throughout the developed world has been the need for more highly skilled workforces. This is usually justified by the more competitive, global, knowledge-based economy in which organisations have to compete. To support this rhetoric there has been significant workforce and industry restructuring, and substantial revision of skill formation policies and training and education systems. At the same time, organisations have been exhorted both to display a more overt commitment to fostering learning amongst their employees and to promote the development of what has been termed 'a learning culture' as a means of increasing their productivity and demonstrating best practice performance.

Despite these calls and theorisation about the efficacy of establishing such cultures of learning in some of the organisational literature, there remains a lack of clarity as to what such a culture looks like in practice. Similarly, the factors that actually drive organisations to pursue such directions are somewhat cloudy. This paper attempts to make more transparent just how these constructs are enacted in organisations.

Research approach: gaining the perspectives of organisations

There is a substantial literature which has attempted to define and theorise the notion of a learning culture in a prescriptive manner (eg Coopey 1996; Denton 1998; Pedler et al 1991; Senge 1990). However, in undertaking this research, it was determined that it was important to elicit an understanding of the concept as it is enacted by organisations that see themselves as fostering a learning culture. Working from this position, it was seen from the outset that actual practice involves

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overlapping and socially constructed contextual phenomena, and that the concepts of a learning culture may be enacted in non-uniform practices and patterns.

Table 1: Characteristics of participating organisations

Organisation	Location	Industry	Size	Profit /not for profit	Market	Recent restructure
AstraZeneca Australia Manufacturing Division	New South Wales Metropolitan	Pharmaceutical Manufacturing	400	profit	international	amalgamation
Royal District Nursing Service	South Australia Metropolitan	Community services and health	400	not for profit	state-based	restructure
Banrock Wine and Wetland Centre BRL Hardy	South Australia Regional	Agriculture	14-20 1400	profit	international	amalgamation and restructure
Bartter Enterprises	New South Wales Regional	Agriculture	1500	profit	national	acquisition and restructure
Novell	New South Wales Metropolitan	Information Technology	150	profit	national (part of multi-national)	
Unley City Council	South Australia Metropolitan	Local Government	150	not for profit	local/ community	restructure and threats of amalgamation

For this reason, the following broad understanding of these concepts became a starting point for the research. A learning culture was seen as the existence of a set of attitudes, values, and practices within the organisation that supported and encouraged the continuing process of learning for the organisation and/or its members. Some of the organisations selected for this study have generated what they have claimed is a learning culture through the specific policies, specialised programs, corporate goals or organisational documentation they have established. In others, a learning culture could be seen as more a matter of leadership style and leadership behaviour that encouraged learning and change.

The research was based on the collection and analysis of data from organisations which were seen as prospering and either identified themselves as being committed to fostering learning, as having a learning culture or as being in the process of establishing a learning culture. This case selection strategy was seen as a meaningful way of surfacing how the participating organisations understood and enacted the notions of a commitment to learning and building a learning culture. By also selecting a range of very different organisations, the approach allowed for the expression of differences in the way in which these constructs operate in practice. Thus we had a way of interrogating the often unstated assumption that a learning culture is a homogenous concept which can be applied or transferred in some uniform fashion to any organisation.

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Six organisations were selected that meet these criteria. They were drawn from a range of industries, and were of varying size and structure, located in both metropolitan and regional areas in New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA). A final important criterion was that each participating organisation was prepared to provide researchers with access to employees (managers and staff) for research purposes. Table 1 provides an overview of the participating organisations.

Researchers initially made contact with an organisational representative to discuss the study and ascertain the organisation's position in terms of a commitment to learning and the extent to which it saw itself as having (or moving in the direction of establishing) a learning culture. It was through this key contact that arrangements for further research access was negotiated. Researchers used a loosely structured protocol that they had developed before commencing the case study research to guide interviews. In each organisation studied, up to four senior staff members were interviewed, and focus group meetings and individual interviews were conducted with other employees. Researchers also examined relevant organisational documentation as well as conducting site inspections. Data was then written into case study format, which was then used as a basis for cross-case analysis.

What did the learning organisations look like?

The 'commitment to learning' that was found in each of the participating organisations took on a variety of faces. However, two distinct groupings can be identified.

Formal learning systems

For some of the organisations, the major feature nominated as characterising the organisation's commitment to learning was the establishment (or expansion) of formal on- and off-the-job training or learning programs. In these organisations, a commitment to learning was seen as the efforts made by the organisation to provide employees with increased training opportunities. Some of these organisations established new training systems and structures and saw these as contributing to the building of a learning culture.

One such organisation (Bartters) actively participated in the national vocational education and training system. It established itself as a registered training organisation, accessed public funding for the development of workplace training programs, participated in the Government New Apprenticeship program, and had and formed new partnerships with external educational institutions for the delivery of some programs. This organisation implemented programs that allowed workers to formally learn both on and off the job, in both training classes and through self-paced modules that were linked with the national accreditation system. RPL systems were set up for experienced workers and opportunities were provided for staff at managerial level to gain qualifications through a project managed by the Rural Training Council of Australia.

A second organisation (the manufacturing division of AstraZeneca Australia) also had attempted to strengthen the culture of learning within the organisation by developing an innovative workbased learning and assessment system for its

manufacturing staff. While this system has not been linked formally with a national accreditation system, it does provide employees with career progression opportunities and increased remuneration possibilities. One aspect of this system is an extensive induction program which manufacturing operators complete before formally working on the production line. Some of this program is provided through classroom-based learning. A large component of the program is offered through self-paced and self-starter modules. These modules encourage the learners to ask questions about process from more experienced operators. This approach is seen as having enhanced the confidence and skill of new employees, and as reducing the pressure on production managers when new employees join the production line. It is also seen as contributing to the development of staff, so that they actively participate in the regularly scheduled team meetings once they are assigned to a work team.

A major component of this division's commitment to learning is an assessment system that has been established to determine employees' skill acquisition. A set of increasingly more complex manufacturing skills has been defined in a series of skills progression matrices prepared for all positions within the manufacturing division. As part of this system, once employees can demonstrate (by completing formal assessment) tasks that they have achieved, they are rewarded with increased remuneration and new career opportunities. Much of the learning which is required of employees as part of this system is seen by the organisation as being best achieved informally, through participation in work teams and through discussion and collaborative problem solving, which takes place in the formally scheduled work team meetings. Data gathered through the organisation's quality system is used by work teams in these meetings to discuss problems and work on more effective or efficient methods of production. Employees are also able to develop higher level skills by seeking assignment to tasks where they work closely with more experienced colleagues.

Each work team in this organisation has been assigned a training specialist (known as a Learning Systems Manager), who attends work team meetings and works with both team supervisors and individuals to assist in skill formation processes. One such specialist commented about the role she played with the work team as follows:

> Anything that comes up in the production team - we are the contact. It doesn't mean the Learning Systems person can always solve the problem but we can help generate the solution.

Efforts have also been made in this organisation to better equip manufacturing managers for a managerial role. A workbased management development program requires participants to complete a major project that supports existing organisational needs either individually or in small groups. This has been developed with an external tertiary organisation.

Another organisation that has demonstrated its commitment to learning through the provision of formal skills acquisitions programs is the Australian division of the large multinational IT organisation Novell. This organisation has been active in developing certified programs for the use of its products in Australia, following the lead of its parent company. Most recently this organisation has been leading the IT industry in establishing certification programs as part of standard curriculum activities within a number of schools, universities and VET providers. Providers of

these programs are encouraged to form strategic alliances with local businesses who are channel partners of Novell, so that students who have completed the certification programs are able to maximise the benefits of their training in the local business community. Senior members of this organisation have recently been involved in the development of IT industry training packages and are playing a role in the national training advisory body.

The organisation has also fairly recently established a program with a registered training organisation that delivers a wide range of programs and services for the IT industry, including career transition and workforce development programs. Key staff from both Novell and the training organisation have collaboratively identified a range of competences required by the industry generally, and Novell in particular. They have developed a 12 month training program to assist individuals in acquiring the identified competences. Participants selected for the program are required to have 3-5 years business experience before being admitted to the program, and are engaged by Novell for at least the twelve months of their development. Novell is also active in encouraging its channel partners involvement in this program. The program involves off-the-job training offered by the training company, followed by a period of on-the-job training in Novell. Participants are rotated through the different sections of Novell to provide them with a holistic understanding of the parent company and the range of work involved. This program goes beyond a limited technical focus; it attempts to develop participant's generic skills through presentations, problem-solving exercises and active participation in team meetings.

In each of the above organisations, a commitment to learning has involved provision of either increased learning, or assessment opportunities, by way of some formal learning or learning-related system. Completion of such learning or successful assessment of learning is linked to increased remuneration or career progression. In each of the above cases, there is also evidence of role change for the training and development staff. In these organisations, the training and development staff are now acting as internal organisational consultants rather than solely deliverers of a calendar of face-to-face training events. As consultants, these training and development staff may be involved in some delivery, but, just as often, they act as mentors or coaches while individuals are on-line or on the job. They are also responsible for assisting trainees/employees to complete self-managed modules, and arranging work tasks to assist in the required skills acquisition.

Organisational structures

In other organisations in this study, the nature of what is seen as an increased commitment to learning has taken on a more informal face. In at least half of the organisations studied, new organisational structures have been implemented that they believe foster learning. For example, in the local government authority, an organisational restructure saw the elimination of one division and the regrouping of various functions. This new structure required employees to engage in more collaborative teamwork that generated new forms of learning. Staff members reported that there was a significant increase in learning, as the restructure had required and made possible increased information sharing and informal mentoring. One staff member described the process of learning as follows:

> We usually come up with an idea about how it should be done and then if we hit a wall we'll always bring it up in team meetings, so, it's absolutely brainstorming and bouncing ideas off each other ...

In another organisation [the Royal District Nursing Service - RDNS], a revision of the services offered, and the establishment of new ways of working, were also nominated as significantly contributing to the establishment of a new culture of learning. New work practices saw more extensive staff and client consultation and a process of feedback to staff of all information gathered. It also resulted in the introduction of work performance standard setting and performance feedback measures in one section of the organisation – a model which the organisation is attempting to replicate in other divisions. In achieving this new way of working, the manager of this unit stated:

> I certainly wasn't confident taking on that project but the RDNS is very encouraging. We have achieved so much in the past year from making mistakes and learning and we've been supported through it. The organisation gives lots of positive feedback along the way.

The final organisation studied, a unit in an Australian based organisation operating in international markets, provided what could be seen, at least initially, as quite a different model for achieving a culture of learning. The parent company has a well-established training and development system that operates throughout many of its plants. However, the unit studied for this research provided a model for fostering a kind of entrepreneurial learning that was being strongly supported by the parent company. The launch of a new wine label became the catalyst for this somewhat different model of a learning culture. In launching the new label, the parent company sought to establish a firm link between its environmental work with wetland care in Australia and its new product line. This company had established an environmental education centre as part of its work for wetland care, and the linkage between the organisation's production and its concern for the environment has became part of the organisation's global marketing strategy.

The process of establishing the environmental education centre required considerable liaison with the local community, and provided opportunities for the organisation to learn from unusual circumstances and experiences. Staff were encouraged to take risks with ideas, and to look for new ways of doing things. There is an emphasis at the site on team action and open communication and, to a very large extent, there is an expectation that staff will take on leadership roles when opportunities arise that call on their specific expertise. In so doing, this organisation is seeking to promote a culture of adventure that seems to be linked to a policy of direct action. Through this, staff are encouraged to focus on the goals of the company and to think of ways to achieve these directly without seeking too much direction or endorsement from superiors. In this organisation, learning is more about being open to innovation - sometimes from improbable quarters. Staff are encouraged to find new ways of seeing things, new ways of doing things, linking things that had not been linked before and following possibilities. To achieve this, the company (and particularly the unit studied for the research) favours strong, open, interactive working teams as a major feature of its management structure.

A more diverse picture

The vignettes presented above represent only elements of the various 'learning cultures' that were apparent within the organisations. However, they reveal that organisations and their members interpret the idea of a commitment to learning or a learning culture quite differently. The vignettes – as with the fuller case studies – also reveal that such cultures are enacted differently within organisations. Thus the search for a uniform model that is easily transferred may not be appropriate in any attempt to encourage organisations to establish an increased commitment to learning.

Just as examining the nature of learning cultures in organisations reflects the complexity of that construct, a similar complexity can be seen when examining what has driven these organisations to embark upon a program of building their learning culture and in maintaining the climate of learning.

What drives a commitment to learning?

All organisations, perhaps not unexpectedly, indicated that they were facing the pressures of an increasingly competitive economic environment. For the organisations that were operating in national or international markets, there was a need to achieve effective and efficient production and distribution, in order to maintain or extend their reach in the more aggressive markets in which they were now operating. For the not-for-profit organisations - more locally and service-oriented - there were still what could be seen as competitive pressures, although these took a different form. The not-for-profit organisations were experiencing the pressures of new administrative systems and more commercially-oriented models of management. Both also were feeling the pressures of budgets that are more restricted, and a need to deliver more and improved services required by their clients. Participants from the organisations nominated these pressures as significant drivers of the need for new forms of learning.

A second consistently nominated factor had to do with staff availability. In several of the organisations there was a need not only to acquire staff with appropriate work skills, but also to retain them. Some of the participating organisations needed, at least initially, to acquire staff with an appropriate mix of technical skills. In other organisations, the need was to acquire and retain staff with a new mindset about work, the capacity to embrace new understandings of how work was to be conducted, and a willingness to accept greater autonomy and responsibility for work output.

In other organisations, the structures created by them - either in terms of management systems or work organisation - acted as drivers of this new culture. For example, in several of the organisations, a much greater emphasis on teamwork and team generation of solutions or ways of working was contributing to a newer understanding of learning. In other organisations, structures related to rewarding learning through workplace promotion or increased remuneration were encouraging employees to accept more responsibility for their own work-related learning.

Finally, providing employees with more feedback about their own, their team's or the organisation's performance was having a stimulating effect in fostering learning. In at least two organisations, performance feedback technology was being used to provide work teams with more data about their performance, and the performance of the organisation and was used as a basis for ongoing decision making about work processes. Managers and staff nominated such an approach as both a feature and a driver of the cultures that were emerging within those organisations. In a similar vein, for several organisations, the development of documentation detailing the performance levels required was also nominated as a feature that characterised the new culture as well as a driver of the culture.

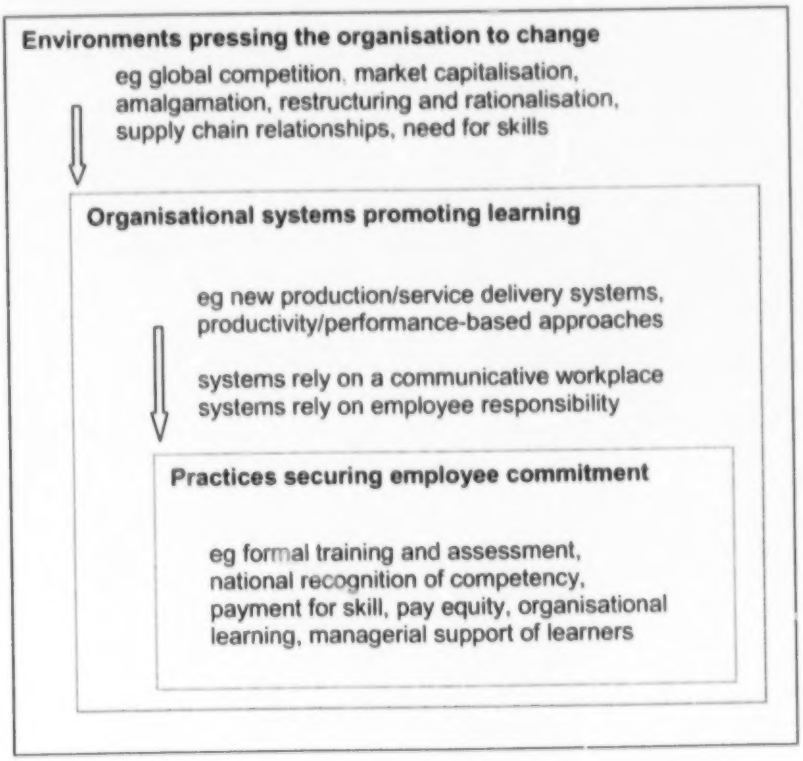
A possible model

In making sense of the case studies, it is helpful to attempt a depiction of the kind of processes at work in driving the cultures of learning as they exist in the six organisations. While such a depiction oversimplifies the complexity of the processes that the research has captured, it does help portray the elements that have contributed to building and maintaining the learning cultures in the organisations studied. Figure 1 therefore attempts to show how the learning culture of the organisation is embedded within the systems, employee interactions and work practices of the participating organisations.

This model shows how the enterprises are adapting to a changing environment in response to increasingly competitive market pressures. These press enterprises to develop organisational systems that enable them to adapt, survive and prosper. The catalysts emerging from the competitive environment (eg organisational restructure, rationalisation, acquisition, other competitors, changing trade arrangements and corporatisation) tend to demand work-related learning by employees. Moreover, conditions of employment require not only technical skills, but also capacity to adjust to new ways of working, and to some extent a capacity for adaptability. In such an environment, employees are expected to demonstrate a capability for ongoing learning to meet the demands of the more competitive environment.

To manage in such an environment there is also pressure on organisations to develop systems that, while primarily designed to promote productivity, also promote learning that enables employees to adapt to changing work demands. These systems require or enable employees to take more responsibility for a wider range of outputs, and this is regarded by organisations as part of the learning process they require. They allow for, and demand, increased communication between employees about work, and they promote the capacity of employees for decision making.

Figure 1. Dimensions of learning culture


Environments pressing the organisation to change
eg global competition, market capitalisation, amalgamation, restructuring and rationalisation, supply chain relationships, need for skills
Organisational systems promoting learning
eg new production/service delivery systems, productivity/performance-based approaches
systems rely on a communicative workplace
systems rely on employee responsibility
Practices securing employee commitment
eg formal training and assessment, national recognition of competency, payment for skill, pay equity, organisational learning, managerial support of learners

Consequently, there is systematic encouragement of more open communication and the emergence of a decision-making climate in which employees are *expected* to contribute. This is reinforced through both enterprise philosophy and manager-modelled behaviour. In such organisations, employees actively learn from each other through informal, team or workplace group discussion and through problem solving based on data collected or formal and informal consultation. As part of the process, the traditional providers of learning in organisations – the training and development specialists – are experiencing a change in both their role and their skill set. There is evidence that these practitioners are moving from being providers of learning in the narrow sense, towards assuming a broader role of 'embedding' learning in work practices, work relationships and other organisational systems.

Hence, the systems instituted as part of the demand for enhanced performance are inherently also ones designed to promote learning. Thus learning is being 'instituted' (Solomon and McIntyre 2000) in the work process within new organisational settings.

This model therefore represents the development of learning in a certain way. It suggests that a learning culture is something achieved through deliberative arrangements designed to maximise productive work in a highly competitive environment. In these contexts, organisational systems have to be designed to

support the development of employees if productivity goals are to be achieved. Importantly, it means that 'learning culture' does not arise through the exhortation of managers alone or the goodwill of employees who are persuaded that it is a good thing. Rather, it develops as a result of conscious organisational changes managed in directions that are seen to enhance the productivity of the organisation.

This has important ramifications for policy. It implies that our national goals of a 'learning Australia' are at least as likely to arise from changes in industrial relations or Industry Policy as they are from promoting traditional educational solutions.

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